

COMPUTERS/HILLEL SEGAL

Souped-up printer sports blotches

Remember when you could spot dot-matrix print from across the room? Those telltale dots on the page looked like nothing a typewriter had ever produced. But now things have changed.

New, souped-up, 24-pin printers are becoming popular, with print quality that some people feel rivals typewriters. Most of the old dot-matrix printers have only nine pins in their print heads. Nonetheless, I'm not excited about the 24-pin technology so far.

Faster print speed and very respectable print quality, both in one package, are what the 24-pin printers promise. Tantalized, I obtained two top-of-the-line models for review.

One of them, the Star NB-15 from Star Micronics Company Ltd. of New York, offers a pleasing rendition of the 10-pitch Prestige type style and it prints near-letter-quality

at 100 characters a second. An average speed for a daisy-wheel printer is 25 to 30 characters a second. Some of the better printers run at as much as 55 characters a second. Even the top-of-the-line Diablo D-80 can run only 80 characters a second. So, it's easy to conclude that if speed is important in your office, it may be worth considering near-letter-quality output to get it.

But after testing two NB-15s, I have reservations about the machine — chiefly about its life expectancy. But I'm impressed with some of its other features. Here's why:

✓ When it worked, it worked well. I tested it by running a thousand invoices at a clip. There were no misalignments and no chewed-up pages. The spacing on the 2,000th invoice was identical to the spacing on the first.

✓ The type face is appealing. I

wouldn't choose it to output business letters, but felt no qualms at all about using it for invoices.

✓ It has an "expanded mode" that allows the characters to be printed in double or quadruple size. That's a feature you certainly won't find on daisy-wheel printers.

✓ Its cloth ribbons have a relatively long life — at least three times as long as the ribbons for similar machines.

On the downside, as with almost all dot-matrix printers, the NB-15 is noisy. It will disturb people in an open office unless you buy an acoustic enclosure. But it has two other drawbacks that are far more serious.

First, after hours of trying, I could not get it to work properly with my favorite word-processing program, WordPerfect.

But the thing that bothered me most was not the noise or the problems with WordPerfect. Both of these are solvable with effort. It was the question of reliability. The NB-15 proved to be very fragile — certainly not a workhorse. Shortly

after I received it, the "on line" button broke. And then, only 2,000 invoices down the road, a board went out. Rather than repair the machine, the company chose to send me another, but it had other mechanical or electrical problems too. It's certainly unscientific to generalize from a sample size of only two, but it's not encouraging.

The NB-15 lists at \$1,399, plus \$59 apiece for optional font cartridges — and if you want italics, you'll have to buy at least one cartridge.

The bottom line: With some laser printers now costing less than \$2,000, it's hard to justify such a high price for a dot-matrix printer. And if you can't use a laser for other reasons, such as for wide paper or continuous forms, other workhorse printers seem to be better buys.

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